

# Best Practices in Franciscan Education

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## BEST PRACTICES IN FRANCISCAN EDUCATION STAFF

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*Autism Awareness  
Month, Academics, and  
Franciscan Values*

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Sylvania, Ohio



## Introducing Best Practices On-Line

It is with great pleasure  
that we offer you this first  
newsletter on-line.

It is our hope that we will  
be able to publish this  
newsletter several times  
throughout the year.

Look around your college  
or university and if you ob-  
serve Franciscan Values  
being applied in practical  
ways, share that informa-  
tion with your peers.

As we strive to integrate  
the Franciscan Intellectual  
Tradition into every area  
of our campuses we can  
benefit from the experi-  
ences of one another.

If you would like to share a  
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*Preach  
the Gospel  
always,  
If necessary  
use words.*

## Autism Awareness Month, Academics, and Franciscan Values

by Beth VanRheenen, Ph.D.

### Introduction

Lourdes College, a liberal arts college in Northwest Ohio and a member of the Association of Franciscan Colleges and Universities (AFCU), has 2,200 students, approximately half of whom are “non-traditional” and fifteen percent of whom are education majors, figures that perhaps explain why the Future Educators Association (FEA) and the Non-Traditional Student Union (NTSU) became partners in sponsoring what they envisioned as “a major event” in recognition of Autism Awareness Month in April 2009. As the faculty advisor of NTSU, I agreed to work with students from these two organizations to develop an “Autism Awareness Event” that featured a dinner (the proceeds of which were donated to The Autism Academy of Learning in Toledo), brief videos, and three speakers: the principal of the Autism Academy of Learning, Mark Lafferty, M.S. in Clinical Psychology; Heather K. Halasz, Ed.S., Nationally Certified School Psychologist for Lenawee County Intermediate School District in Michigan; and 19-year-old Micah, a recent high school graduate with autism.

Despite the diversity of the speakers and activities, the planners originally thought the program was likely to attract no more than 40 people, and we expected its major value would be giving the student leaders experience in organizing an event. To our great surprise, the event drew 110 people—future teachers, educators at all levels, and parents of children with autism—and the written responses received afterward by my colleague in the Education Department, Sister Valerie Grondin, OSF, M.A., who had vigorously encouraged her students to attend the event, indicate extensive and important outcomes in four areas: participants’ concepts of exceptionality, instructional strategies for teaching children with autism, possible strategies for improving special education professional development, and, perhaps most importantly, students’ greater appreciation of service learning and lived Franciscan values.

### Concepts of Individuation and Exceptionality

As expected, many of the participants’ learning in regard to disorders on the autism spectrum came from the two professional presenters. Erica, a student enrolled in EDU 250 Educational Psychology, stated, “I learned that there is no medical test to diagnose autism and that most insurance policies will not cover this disorder which really surprised me,” and another student wrote, “I learned many facts about autism: There is no cure but early intervention can help . . . and there is a wide spectrum in severity of symptoms, but no two children with autism are exactly alike.” Some students’ comments included details of key concepts, as exhibited by a third student who wrote, “I learned that some of the symptoms of autism are resistance to changes in routine, language deficits, displaying extreme distress for no apparent reason, social deficits, little or no eye contact, and not being responsive to verbal cues.” A fourth student, Jenna, was impressed by comments made by Mark Lafferty, principal of The Autism Academy of Learning. She wrote, “Mr. Lafferty stated that his goal is to promote a higher quality of life and the realization of the full intellectual and social development of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder. The Academy’s core values consist of believing . . . that ASD is a development disability that does not define an individual.”

Friday, April 17

6 - 9 p.m.

St. Joseph Hall, Room 110

### Autism Awareness Event

*Sponsored by*

**Future Educators Association  
& Non-Traditional Student  
Union**

*Presentations by...*

**Autism Academy Principal  
School Psychologist  
Student with Autism**

*Dinner provided by*

**Spaghetti Warehouse**

Numerous students commented that they were unaware that autism affects about 1 in every 150 students and expressed shock that ASD is so widespread. Although most of the respondents made positive comments about the professional speakers, they were unanimously and overwhelmingly enthusiastic in their praise of the final speaker, Micah, the recent high school graduate who has Autism. Comments ranged from “He just blew me away” to “He was amazing and inspiring.” One student simply stated, “I cannot possibly express the impact this 19-year-old had on my opinion of autism. Everything I ever thought about the disorder was thrown aside after hearing him speak.” Another said, “Of course, the highlight and star of the evening was Micah. Talk about eye-opening! It was fascinating to hear him speak about . . . well, anything. I feel Micah gave us a valuable glimpse into the world of someone with autism.” A third said, “Micah was so brave and an inspiration to listen to,” and another commented that Micah was “the most informative” of the three speakers and the one who “deeply touched my heart because he gave a deep look into the life of someone who lives with autism.” *Every* written response provided evidence that the program enhanced the college students’ concepts of exceptionality.

As a professional educator and supporter of Franciscan values, I was pleased with the college students’ assessment of Micah. Although he spoke with the lack of fluidity that characterizes the speech of many who have ASD, Micah was indeed articulate and personable; as one student stated, he was “charming.” But I was most pleased by how many of the college students seemed to assimilate Micah’s core message, paraphrased by one as follows: “We label so many people and try to fit them into categories of ‘normal.’ Really, though, what is *normal*? We are all different and we need to embrace that instead of being afraid. . . . I will strive to educate myself as much as possible and do my best never to stereotype against a student for his or her disability. It is so important to think of the person first.” Another Lourdes student wrote, “Micah shared how those with autism are normal people who have different needs just like normal people,” a somewhat awkward phrasing that nevertheless reveals that the student was assimilating new information regarding what is and what is not exceptional about people with ASD. Many of the college students in one way or another reported that Micah’s presentation profoundly affected their concepts of people with autism. One wrote that what “stood out to me was that his [Micah’s] emotions are fully intact, but expressing them with words is difficult.”

*“Finally, Micah, the boy with autism, got up and presented about his disorder. He was absolutely amazing and opened my eyes to a lot of things that I didn’t know. Micah said that for those of us becoming teachers, the best thing we can do is not make assumptions because doing so would make us like ‘those mean kids in school who make fun of special education.’ ”*  
--Elizabeth

These student responses regarding a young man who many would assume to be “Other” –different and, therefore, on the margins of their concern—reflect the concept of *Haecceitas* or individuality popularized by Duns Scotus. In the words of K. B. Osborne (2008, *The AFCU Journal*), “By using the term *Haecceitas*, Scotus emphasized the uniqueness of each and every human person which is his or her most distinctive aspect . . . a major reason why, in the Franciscan Intellectual Tradition and in Franciscan Spirituality, the honoring of every individual creature is an honoring of one’s brother and sister” (p. 18-19). Osborne further elucidates this point by quoting Alan Wolter’s remark that each person has “a unique value as one singularly wanted and loved by God, quite apart from any trait that person shares with others or any contribution he or she might make to society (p. 19). In our material and secular world, such concepts are countercultural but should be prime ingredients of a Franciscan education. The students who attended this Autism Awareness Event, moreover the student leaders who planned it, were able to see these Franciscan values in a lived experience.

## Academic Insights and Instructional Strategies

As with gaining insights on the Franciscan view of individuation and exceptionality, the college students evidenced important learning from the professional presenters. Reflecting on Mark Lafferty's discussion of The Autism Academy of Learning, one student wrote, "It sounds like there are many methods of teaching utilized, including visual cues." Referring to the school psychologist, Heather Halasz, the same student remembered her emphasis on the importance of having good paraprofessionals in the classroom. One student commented on her previous oversimplified "understanding" of autism, stating with (possibly unintentional) humor, "Prior to attending the Autism Awareness Event, I thought I knew pretty much all there was to know about autism," adding that she was impressed with Mr. Lafferty's description of the inclusion of vocational education in the curriculum at The Autism Academy of Learning, commenting that she thought it would prepare students "to navigate the 'real' world."

Another student expressed appreciation for Mark Lafferty's presentation that "was interesting in that we got a good overview of how his facility works, their goals, and their mission," adding, "I was impressed that he seemed to stress a holistic, 'person-centered' approach in dealing with his students as opposed to forcing a homogeneous approach to a varied student body." As one of the organizers of the event, I was pleased with the education majors' obvious attention to the professional presenters and their remarks on various aspects of what they had learned. However, as was the case concerning their learning about the exceptionality of ASD students, the college students reacted most strongly to Micah, the student speaker. One education student wrote that "listening to Micah was much more powerful than listening to an educator or psychologist or any other 'expert' on autism; for me, Micah is the expert." Another college student exuberantly wrote, "Aside from being immensely entertaining, I feel Micah gave us a valuable glimpse into the world of someone with autism. We can read books, look at case studies, and pore over current research, but there's nothing like getting information right from the 'horse's mouth.'"

Before delving into Micah's specific instructional activities, most of the education majors commented on Micah's analogies for his experience with autism. In his opening remarks, Micah compared ASD to "having a thunderstorm and clouds in your brain" and to the X-Men, popular comic book heroes whose unusual gifts create challenges for them. Such vivid imagery, I believe, prepared the audience to receive the bulk of his remarks which were directed primarily to the educators and future educators in the audience, one who generalized Micah's remarks as "some practical and insightful advice to teachers."

In his presentation, Micah commented first on a known struggle for students with autism: focus. In regard to this challenge, Micah stated that teachers need to get to know their students personally in order to counteract the "distractions inside their heads." By knowing him and his interests, a few of his teachers and paraprofessionals made him feel that he had value, which heightened his ability to focus on his work. Micah also stressed that teachers and paraprofessionals who know their students' interests create channels for socialization. He agreed that students with autism often appear to be in their own worlds because "the distractions in their brains" are so overwhelming. Thus, "tuning out" everything around them is easier than trying to sort

out all aspects of the internal "thunderstorm." However, he stated that through patience, teachers who know their students' interests help their social skills to grow. This is especially true when professionals allow the student time to process thoughts into spoken or written words. With written assignments, Micah explained that getting thoughts "from his word to his hand" is difficult and frustrating, sometimes requiring him, even though he is high functioning, to work a full hour to get a single sentence on paper. He stressed that teachers who allow time without pressure aid the process of communication.



*"From Micah, I heard for the first time what autism is truly like. He made me see that autism does not render an individual completely helpless. His story was touching, inspiring, and at times funny. As a future educator, this experience has changed my personal philosophy."*



Micah also stressed the importance of using a child's strengths to enhance further learning. Students who handle a computer well, for example, should be encouraged to learn through computer games and related tools. One widely discussed challenge for students with ASD that Micah mentioned is barriers to communication. Micah stressed, therefore, the need for clear, concise directions, adding that assignments "must have a purpose" that the student understands; otherwise, he said, the student becomes quickly frustrated.

While the above instructional strategies may not appear to be ground-breaking, hearing them discussed by a student who has experienced firsthand both good and poor techniques enhanced their impact. Yet many of Micah's comments went beyond the "common knowledge" of professionals. For example, I was surprised by Micah's analysis of repetition as a teaching tool. Though he stated that it "apparently" worked for teaching some children with autism, he strongly felt that it had not worked for him; instead, repetition makes things more confusing. His teachers, therefore, needed to present clear, concise, and precise directions the first time, giving him time to process the directions before they attempted to "clarify" with further instructions that served only to make their instructions murkier. Such "insider information," though possibly not widely applicable, could prove to be helpful to some students.

#### Videos Shown:

"Claudia"

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KZzTcVqs\\_k0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KZzTcVqs_k0)

"Blessing in Disguise"

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SdXOIlFY5Ts&feature=related>

Micah's most powerful personal revelation, however, regarded his difficulty with making eye contact, something he acknowledged is widespread in those with ASD, but which for him is physically painful. In fact, for him to look someone in the eyes is as painful as "staring into the sun," yet Micah confided that he had been "forced" to look into someone's eyes by a "professional." One of the college students commented, "It's absolutely heartbreaking that someone charged with a child's wellbeing would do something like that, even out of ignorance. It's information like that that should reinforce the idea that, despite how much technical knowledge we may have as educators, no two kids are the same, and we absolutely must allow for and be aware of differences in every child." Continuing his story, Micah added that he had finally learned to *appear* to be making eye contact by looking at a person's nose, forehead, or ear, a strategy that he suggested teachers pass on to others with ASD.

After concluding his prepared remarks, Micah invited the audience to ask questions, which he handled with impressive confidence and ease. In response to one question he said, "We all have special needs," an insightful remark that drew spontaneous applause from the audience. When asked what are some pre-conceptions about people with autism that bother him, Micah quipped, "That we're bad dressers," a remark that drew widespread laughter. Turning like a model on a runway, he said, "Look. Don't I have style?" I wanted to reply, "Micah, you have all kinds of style." But Micah's response to one father's heart-wrenching question made the greatest impression on all the respondents. In a choked voice, a young father asked how he could know whether his nonverbal son loves him. Micah immediately and confidently negated the stereotype that people with autism are not capable of emotion by responding emphatically, "**He does** love you. He just hasn't learned yet how to express it." Coming from Micah, this assurance carried true weight—and great hope.



Having Micah speak along with professional educators unquestionably enhanced the students' academic experience, and, as Ernest L. Boyer insists in *Scholarship Reconsidered* (1990) that higher education must do, it helped to bring "ethical implications" into the academic realm. Students were shown in a powerful way that knowledge is not enough, but that, as Boyer says, knowledge and thought must be "connect[ed] to action . . . to more, not less participation. The aim of education is not only to prepare students for productive careers, but also to enable them to live lives of dignity and purpose; not only to generate new knowledge, but to channel that knowledge to humane ends" (p. 77-78). Student leaders in the two organizations that sponsored the event, the Future Educators Association and the Non-Traditional Student Union, had the experience of putting their educations and their Franciscan values into action for the benefit of a marginalized group. Their feeling of having provided true value to a real world challenge is what, I believe, motivated the same group to organize the "Second Annual Autism Event" in 2010.

### **Strategies for Professional Development and Franciscan Practice**

In terms of strategies for improved special education professional development, the success of the two programs suggests that their variety was quite effective. Beginning with a lost-cost meal, the profits of which were donated to The Autism Academy of Learning, set a collegial tone which was enhanced by the seating arrangement: round tables that accommodated ten people each. Participants' learning was intensified through the use of power point and handouts provided by the speakers. Although some of the college students verbalized concern about the length of the programs, three hours, the presentations seemed to move quickly, perhaps partially due to short videos about autism which were shown after the first and second speakers. After the second speaker, the organizers announced a dessert break, which allowed attendees to move around, talk, and refresh themselves before the longer keynote addresses. The fact that all speakers at both events took questions from the floor also allowed a change of pace, but the aspect of the program that was unquestionably outstanding and most powerful was hearing a first-hand account from someone who has autism. Even if other aspects of Lourdes College's Autism Awareness Event do not become a model for professional development seminars, this aspect should. And within the realm of Franciscan Colleges and Universities, such an annual event provides a excellent opportunity for illuminating Franciscan values and practice.

*"Meeting a child  
who appears to  
have conquered  
many of the  
negative traits  
of autism was  
a validation  
that what we do  
in the classroom  
matters." Kris*

In addition to the variety of speakers, power point, videos, and breaks, I think the program's effectiveness was strengthened by the composition of the audience, a feature of the event that might be unique. A significant number of attendees were professional educators from Lourdes College and local primary and secondary schools. A number of participants were parents, grandparents, and other family members of children diagnosed with ASD. The largest number of participants were college students: some were members of the two student organizations that hosted the event, and others were education, nursing, sociology, social work, and psychology majors whose professors promoted the event. Also, all who came—educators and students alike—were given professional-looking, personalized certificates of attendance to add to their portfolios.

This unusual blend of participants, food, and mediums of presentations gave the event an energy that I do not usually encounter at professional development seminars, leading me to think that cooperation among educators, professionals in special education, and future teachers enrolled at local colleges and universities could be an excellent strategy to improve continuing education in the field of special education. The many positive remarks from the professional attendees attested to the program's success, but the written reflections provide "proof positive" that the event made strong and positive impressions on the college students. One student, Erica, stated, "I learned a lot about autism in this presentation, and I am sure that there is much more to learn. It is my hope that I will keep learning about autism and other disorders that will be presented to me as a teacher." Another student, Ben, wrote, "This experience has changed some of my personal philosophy. I would recommend this event to anyone going into the education field to hear the testimony of an individual living with autism." Jennifer stated, "This whole experience was life-changing, and I do not mean that superficially. Micah gave me a renewed sense of why I am going into the field of education. I have the power to teach not just standards but life situations, such as tolerance for individuals who seem different, but who in reality just look at the world through different eyes."

*"As evidenced by Micah's presentation, one size absolutely does not fit all when it comes to interacting effectively with students with autism." Brian*

Jennifer's perspectives convey the depth of the learning experience. Yes, the evening had a strong academic component, and on a practical level, she and the other attendees learned a number of educational strategies. But those students who organized the event felt that they had made a difference in the *attitudes* with which Lourdes's students would approach those with disabilities. Those who heard Micah and the other speakers gained the sense that all educators need to follow a key Spiritual Maxim of Brother Lawrence: "We must go about our labors quietly, calmly, and *lovingly*, entreating Him to prosper the works of our hands" (p. 71).

These concepts, I think, are in stark contrast to the ideas promoted in an article in the *Profession 2008* publication of the Modern Language Association. In reviewing how French anthropologist Levi-Strauss's concept of *bonnes `a penser* ("good to think with") has been recently applied, the author says, "Among the concepts, objects, theories, practices, and organs that been recently declared by scholars to be 'good to think with' are feminism, science, architecture, taxes, the body, food, hypertext, networks, the liberal tradition, capitalism, and the brain" (p. 12). As Kenan B. Osborne, OFM, reminds us, "A defining aspect of the Franciscan Intellectual Tradition is its close identity with Franciscan spirituality" (p. 19), a clear and direct statement that represents best practices for any member of the AFCU.

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**About the author:**



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She teaches literature and composition. She is also the advisor for the Non-Traditional Student Union (NTSU). Since this article the NTSU has sponsored another Autism Awareness Event. These events provide an integration of service learning, academics and Franciscan values.